Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, March 9, 1879, with transcript

Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel (Hubbard) Bell. Brattle St., Cambridge, Sunday, March 9, 1879. Dear May:

I thought I brought enough money with me to meet every exigency but I found yesterday on arriving in Boston that I was too poor to send you a telegram! I hesitated between a light supper at the Parker House and a telegram to you — I investigated the contents of all my pockets but could only discover sixty-five cents! It was seven o'clock and I had eaten nothing since breakfast at Jersey City at eight o'clock in the morning. Should I send you a telegram and trust to grace'o larder? Or should I relieve the cravings of nature and leave your telegram till Monday? These questions I discussed with myself as I sauntered along with my valise in hand — but each step brought me nearer to the Parker House and before I had quite decided the matter I found myself seated on a stool at the luncheon bar asking for a cup of coffee and something to eat! My supper cost me forty-five cents — leaving me just enough for my horse-car tickets to Cambridge and back.

I reached Jersey City early yesterday morning but was suffered to remain in my berth until nearly eight o'clock. I had a comfortable breakfast at the Depot Restautant and then made my way to Fourteenth St. I found Grandpapa McCurdy at the breakfast table downstairs and Cousin Charles just beginning his breakfast upstairs. All seemed well and baby looked much better than when I saw him last — but he is at his best very thin and light. He seemed to enjoy his Melon's Food amazingly — he lay on his back upon his Mamma's lap 2 cooing for more and only stopped feeding to stare at me. The Dog's Head reached its destination safely — and I left the Bible for Mr. McCurdy to make the entry of Elsie's birth at his leisure. On reaching Boston last night I went at once to the central office and telephoned your Uncle Eustis and the Mutual Life Building in search of your father. He had

gone to Cambridge — and every person had left the telephone office excepting the clerk who informed me by telephone of the death of Mr. Bradley's brother the day before. He has been very ill for some time past but I hardly think that any of the family were prepared for this fatal termination. I met Willie Hubbard and Harry in the Parker House on their way to some friend's house and had quite a nice talk with them. On reaching Cambridge I found your father and Grace and Willie Winlock in the large parlor. It looked so nice and home-like. I wished you could all have been here.

I am afraid a quiet life in Washington is too good a thing to be hoped for — so I think we all better settle down together here in Cambridge. Every time I enter this room — our wedding day comes up before my mind. You dear little wife — I wish I had you here. I'll have to send for you very soon or return to Washington myself — for I can't possibly exist here without you. I found to-day — our Wedding Bell — or at least all that is left of it — a wire framework for a bell of flowers. My trunk is detained at the Depot as I could not find an express-man to bring it out last night — so I must wait for a change of linen until Monday afternoon. I have been 3 hard at work all day upon an article on Electricity in your father's copy of the Encyclopedia Brittanica — and this evening at your father's suggestion I have been trying to reduce to writing my ideas upon the tracing of equi-potential lines by the telephone — and the practical application of the method to the discovery of metallic deposits in the earth. I have covered several sheets of foolscap with hieroglyphics — and as my sole evening's work I have evolved one single opening sentence of about a dozen lines in length!

I find it very hard to write — I am too critical — and stop to alter and amend a sentence before continuing with the subject — and thus lose the thread of my discourse.

Your father says that when he is in a difficulty — he stops — and thinks what he wants to say. He asks himself “What do I went to say” — and he answers himself “I want to say this” and then he puts it down. It may be all very well for him but I find it very difficult to do so. I think my best way of expressing my meaning is to write my paper to you and then

take my letter as the foundation on which to build. At any rate I shall make the attempt tonight so if you don't want a pretty stiff dose of Physics omit the rest of this letter.

You know when you take a galvanic battery and connect the two ends of it by a wire — a current of electricity appears upon the wire — flowing from one pole to the other. The explanation seems to be somewhat as follows: — The chemical action of the battery causes a greater accumulation of electricity upon one pole than on the other. The electrical density or “potential” (as it is 4 technically called) is different at the two poles. The electricity therefore flows away from the pole where the potential is greatest along the wire to the other pole. The action is precisely similar to the flow of water through a pipe. Suppose you have a pipe uniting two reservoirs of water. No motion takes place in the pipe if the water is at the same level in the two reservoirs. But if the water is at a higher level in the one reservoir than in the other a current passes through the pipe and the water flows until equilibrium is restored — that is until the water in both reservoirs stands at the same height. The two elements of the battery — (the copper and zinc plates) may be considered as electrical reservoirs and these reservoirs are tapped by the conducting wire uniting them. The chemical action of the battery always keeps one reservoir filled at the expense of the other.

It is no use! I can't go on! You poor dear little May it is too bad to inflict such a letter upon you but it is now one o'clock and I have no time to write another.

With much love to you and Elsie and to all.

Your loving husband, Alec.